

Community Awareness and Preparation for Covid-19

All of us need to work together to limit the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Community awareness and preparation is the key to achieving this goal.

There is already a great deal of publicly available information. There is also a great deal of false information. Please be careful to get your information from reputable, scientifically and theologically reliable sources. Not much of that information is produced by or geared towards religious communities. This document and other interventions we produce will be created by, and for faith leaders.

The information in this document is based on scientific data, and is gathered from best practices from around the world. Please receive this as our first attempt to put together information that will be helpful to you and others in your community, so that lives may be saved.

Here are the Basic Facts

1. Novel Coronavirus is a new strain of an older virus. Therefore, there is currently no vaccine to prevent it. It may be 12-18 months away. There is also no effective medication at the moment.
2. It is a respiratory disease, which means that it affects the lungs, and leads to pneumonia. People who are older, have prior medical conditions including heart disease, diabetes, high-blood pressure, lung diseases such as asthma are more susceptible. However, many young people, some without prior medical conditions, have also succumbed to the disease.
3. The virus spreads fast and has a 14 day incubation period. This means that even if you are not feeling sick, you may be a carrier. Unknowingly, you may give it to others.
4. To date, over 1.5 million people across the world have contracted the virus, and almost 100,000 people have died as a result. Today, the virus is present in over 180 countries.

Here are the MOST IMPORTANT things everyone should do

1. Wash hands regularly with soap and water, lathering at least for 20 seconds.
2. Keep a 6 foot physical distance from others.
3. If you sneeze or cough, use a handkerchief, tissue, or cover with the bend on your elbow. If you sneeze or cough into your hands, you must immediately wash with soap and water, or use hand sanitizer.
4. Avoid touching your face, particularly your eyes, nose or mouth.
5. The virus stays alive for up to 3 hours in the air and up to 3 days on metal surfaces such as doorknobs, and up to 5 days on wood. It is necessary to regularly clean surfaces.
6. If/when the government imposes a lockdown or curfew, STAY AT HOME. Use your phone to communicate with people, but DO NOT GATHER with other people.

Weblinks below will provide more detailed instructions from the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control.

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Responsibilities of Religious Leaders

1. Be properly informed. You will receive information from a variety of sources that are not trustworthy. Many of these are religious sources. Please get your information from reliable sources such as the World Health Organization.
2. Be the primary conveyor of good health practices to your community. You have a megaphone: your khutbas, sermons and teachings are received by lots of people. Use that megaphone to communicate the correct information to your community.

Religious Leaders Must Prepare

1. Your congregation may not be able to gather on Friday for prayers, Sunday for church service, or for other prayers or meetings. Please know that some churches and mosques that gathered despite the advice of public health officials have become the biggest spreaders of the virus.
2. Here are some suggestions:
 - Immediately create a communication network such as a telephone tree. Any communication from the mosque, church or temple should go to a small group. Each member of the group calls 5 or 10 assigned members, and they call other assigned members
 - Immediately create a plan to minister to those who are sick or will get sick – and not just from Covid-19.
 - Most phones today have a conference call feature (where two or more people can talk to each other at the same time.) Many use WhatsApp or similar apps. Use these to bring people together for prayer and instruction.
3. Where internet is available, prepare to use video technology with platforms like Facebook Live, Skype, Zoom or WhatsApp to broadcast your service or your message. If you don't know how to do this, ask a young person. They usually do. If your congregation members have internet, teach them to use the apps as well.
4. This is the time to practice what we've been preaching. We may not be able to gather together, but we are still able to reach out to others, particularly those who get sick from the virus, and medical professionals and health care workers. However, we have to reach out with phones and text messaging and other remote devices.

Reliable Internet Resources

- World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

Insights from the Buddhist Tradition

Here are some key Buddhist teachings to help address the uncertainty, fear and anxiety that accompanies during this time of Covid-19.

1. Reflect on the Five Remembrances

These five remembrances are intended for regular reflection. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh's *Plum Village Chant Book* quotes from *Upajjhathana Sutta* of the *Anguttara Nikaya* (57). As the stanza adds, these reflections are for all "whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained."

*I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.
 I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape ill health.
 I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.
 All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.
 My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground upon which I stand.*

2. Acknowledge Fear and Anxiety

The Buddha's most primary teaching is that existence is *dukkha* -- unsatisfactoriness. The chanting of the stanza above affirms the primacy of this teaching in our minds -- suffering, illness and death are normal, they are to be expected, understood and acknowledged. Part of making peace with our reality, no matter what, is expecting *anicca* -- impermanence and unpredictability. Thinking that things should be otherwise adds unnecessary suffering. Rather than fight the world, if we learn to accept the world, we can actually enjoy the world.

3. Practice Meditation

The practice of meditation allows us to develop a deep awareness (or mindfulness) of ourselves and our ability to control our bodies and its impulses. As an example, the practice of meditation makes it possible for us to develop keener senses to be more aware of our surroundings, to be conscious of our movements and even actions such as the ability to control the urge to scratch an itch on your face.

This time of quarantine is a good opportunity to develop a practice of meditation. A basic meditative exercise is the concentration on breathing. When taking a deep breath, say to yourself: I am taking a deep breath. When taking a shallow breath, say to yourself: I am taking a shallow breath. Be aware of inhaling and the expanding of your chest. Similarly, be aware of holding, and exhaling.

Another is a meditation on the steps needed to wash hands: Be aware of opening a tap, wetting of the hands, putting soap on the hands, closing the tap, lathering each finger, in between fingers, the palm, the back of the hand etc. opening the tap, rinsing the soap, closing the tap and drying the hand.

4. Cultivate Compassion

The result of meditative practice is the cultivation of four *brahmaviharas* (literally, abodes of the enlightened ones) also known as the four immeasurables: *metta* -- loving-kindness; *karuna* – compassion; *mudita* – sympathetic joy; and *upekkha* -- equanimity. These four attitudes can help us overcome any calamity, by replacing our anxieties and fears.

While all our states are important, cultivating compassion is particularly so. Even as we are called to practice physical distancing from each other, it is a good time to be socially connected through our phones, computers and other devices.

Meditation is one such device. As you breathe in, acknowledge the suffering and anxiety everyone feels, and as you breathe out, wish everyone peace and well-being. In the next breath, remember those who are sick or dying, as you breathe out wish everyone peace and well-being. As you breathe in, remember those who are in the front lines in hospitals and other health care facilities, as you breathe out, wish everyone peace and well-being.

5. Recognize the Interconnectedness of All Things

The pandemic makes us realize how globally interconnected we are. Not only did the interconnectedness make the virus spread rapidly, we know that when each person acts in self-care, such as washing one's hands, or distancing from others, they are also helping to protect others.

Engaged Buddhist leader Sulak Sivaraksa writes about recognizing our inter-being: I am, therefore, you are. You are, therefore, I am. Cultivating such a mindset of interconnection is critical, particularly in a time like this. We are in this together.

More insights from the Buddhist Tradition:

- Tricycle: <https://tricycle.org/category/health/illness/covid-19/>
- Buddhist Door: <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/coronavirus-roundup>

Insights from the Christian Tradition

10 Commandments for Responsible Pastoral Responses to the Corona-Crisis

(abbreviated from the original document published here)

Written by Rev. Dr. Dietrich Werner, Bread for the World, Germany

1. Let not your heart be overcome by fear. *John 16:33*

The word from Jesus “Fear not; I have overcome the world” liberates us to develop sober judgement and responsible ways for dealing with the pandemic. What holds true to Christian life in general also applies in this emergency particularly: “Pray as if everything depends on God, act as if everything depends on us” (St. Augustine).

2. Follow protective medical advice to stay clean and wash your hands. *James 4:8*

Biblical tradition has a deep appreciation for the rituals of washing one’s hands and to stay clean. Some criticize ancient rituals of purification as externalized exercises that do not bring us closer to God. However, we should not dismiss today’s regulations since they are essential ways of halting or slowing down the spread of the virus.

3. Discourage religious stigmatization: The virus is not a punishment. *Exodus 23:25*

God does not send waves of punishment to his beloved people. St. Paul saw his own disease as a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7), not as a punishment from God, but as an opportunity to strengthen his faith. The Gospel is not about condemnation or punishment, but about salvation and healing of all (John 3:17).

4. God suffers with the unfinished creation. *Romans 8:22*

Creation groans as in the pangs of childbirth. What human civilization has done to creation destabilizes its inner balances and complex systems. Zoonosis, the phenomenon of viruses jumping from animals to the humans is a result of the human violation of creation, the destruction of natural habitats and the excessive use of animals for human consumption. We must rethink the way we relate to natural resources and to animal life.

5. Beware of false prophets and charlatans. *Matthew 7:15*

Like other crises, this is being exploited by religious charlatans and false prophets. Those who say that gathering in church buildings is a witness of one’s personal faith, are utterly wrong. Let us encourage each other to follow medically advised measures such as hand washing and physical distancing.

6. The true test of faith is the endurance of mutual love and support. *James 1:2-4*

Testing of your faith produces endurance. Endurance requires us to stay in the mode of physical distancing for a long time. It also means that we must not be *spiritually* distant from each other. Churches all around the world have been very creative to develop new ways of expressing spiritual support, togetherness and the endurance of channels of hope in and between their communities.

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7. **Support all who work in frontline ministries of health care. *Romans 12:1***

This crisis is a huge challenge to the medical and health care systems and staff. To offer our lives as living sacrifice for the service of the most vulnerable is a deep obligation and ancient virtue of Christian faith. Mobilize support in any way you can for those who stand in the frontlines. Keep them in your daily prayers. “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfil the law of Christ”. (Galatians 6:2).

8. **Do not let xenophobia or discrimination instigate hatred and violence. *Ephesians 2:14***

People’s anxiety sometimes results in hatred and violence against people or groups who are most vulnerable. High levels of domestic violence have been reported as people are forced to stay together in limited spaces for long periods of time. Christ, our peace, is a powerful sign to let the crisis teach us how vulnerable we are all as global humanity and how much we need each other to solve the most urgent problems of humankind.

9. **Promote a closer interaction between faith communities. *Luke 10:34***

This global crisis demands close interaction and collaboration between faith communities. In the face of human suffering, religious differences become an unbearable luxury. In the story of the Good Samaritan, how much stronger would the result have been if the Priest and the Levite joined with the Good Samaritan to bind up the wounds, take the man to an inn, and pay for his expenses. More than ever, our task is to come together to bandage humanity’s wounds.

10. **Keep hope alive for the period beyond the Corona Crisis. *Revelation 21:4***

The pandemic underlines both the positives and negatives of the current models of globalization. It shows our immense vulnerability to spread of disease, but also the unprecedented opportunities of communication and collaboration. We must turn over systems that favour the privileged and prioritize systems that favour those in the margins. We are inspired by a biblical faith that tells of the abundance of God’s love this whole beautiful earth. Political leaders cannot take us there. This is the task of religious leaders.

More insights from the Christian tradition:

ACT (Action of Churches Together) Alliance: <https://actalliance.org/covid-19>

Insights from the Hindu Tradition

Hinduism's Wish for the World

The Hindu Tradition's most fervent wish for the world is summed up in the following famous stanza regularly chanted in prayer.

*Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah
Sarve Santu Niraamayaah
Sarve Bhadraanni Pashyantu
Maa Kashcid-Duhkha-Bhaag-Bhavet
Om Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih*

May all beings be happy,
May all be free from illness.
May all see what is auspicious,
May no one experience sorrow.
Om Peace, Peace, Peace!

Duty to Bring About Peace

One of Hinduism's core tenets is *dharma*, a word with multiple meanings in English. Its root meaning is to sustain, uphold or support (the world and its social order) and is usually translated law, duty, virtue, righteousness and even religion. Just as individuals who follow their *dharma* eventually achieve liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth, societies that follow their *dharma*, may achieve the peace that is wished for in the stanza above. *Dharma* is also the conviction of one's duty. When that duty is performed in the most sincere and diligent manner, its benefits accrue to the whole world.

A famous story recorded in three scriptural sources, Samudra Manthan (the churning, or agitating of the ocean) may be a metaphor for our present time of Coronavirus pandemic. A battle between the gods and the demons causes the churning in search of *amrita* (the nectar of immortality). The story allows us to recognize our present churning or agitation is an opportunity to shake ourselves from the ways that we have strayed from the performance of our duty and given into apathetic routine. An opportunity to seek *amrita*, the nectar of new possibility and peace awaits.

We can ride the churning and seek the peace by performing our duty sincerely and diligently. However, duty is complex and multi-faceted. The following are some basics:

- Performing rituals, including worship of your chosen deity, weekly *havans* or burning of natural ingredients to clean up not only the germs and bacteria but also any unhealthy thoughts or intentions; and on special occasions, *yagnas* or offerings, in order to provide for those who are less privileged. Also, giving special attention to daily prayer and meditation as a way of cultivating calmness and inner strength. Yoga is beneficial for both physical and mental health.
- Living simply, including eating simple, easily digestible, preferably vegetarian and fresh food. It is also paying attention to meal rituals such as thorough washing of hands and offering prayers of gratitude.
- Living respectfully towards others particularly elders and those of the opposite gender, which includes limiting proximity or touching.
- Living in harmony with nature. Nature consists of five elements: Agni (fire), Vayu (air), Jal (water), Prithvi (earth), Akash (sky). We are a part of nature. Our existence manifests because of these five elements. If we take care of nature, nature will take care of us.

- Understanding that God is in everything in the universe, in every human being and every creature. Statues and shrines in temples remind us of times and ways in which God has manifested in the world in the past. But God does not reside in these places and therefore can be worshipped anywhere.

The Gift of Greeting



If you bring your palms together in front of your chest or your face, bow, and say 'Namaste' or 'Namaskar,' you are engaging in one of world's most ancient forms of greeting. The words come from the Rg Veda, the earliest Hindu scripture and mean worship, homage, and deep respect. In yogic literature, it means 'The divine within me bows to the divine within you.' At a time when we are advised not to shake hands, embrace, hug or kiss but stand six feet apart from each other, 'Namaste' or 'Namaskar' can become a universal greeting.

Insights from the Islamic Tradition

Adapted from an article by Samana Siddiqui

Maintaining our physical and mental health is critical for our families, our children, our marriages, and our long-term well-being. Here are some ways to handle this challenge:

1. **Prayer:** *Dua* is the “essence of worship.” Allah Himself tells us to call upon Him, and He will respond to us (Quran 40:60). When we are feeling overwhelmed, let us lower our heads and raise our hands in *dua* to ease our hardship and relieve us of this difficulty. Muslims, who are unable to regularly pray five times a day, are encouraged to make use of the Corona virus lockdown to use this as an opportunity to build such a practice.
2. **Manage your Anger:** Minor annoyances, sometimes become major grievances when people are cooped up together for an indefinite amount of time. Anger management can help defuse a dangerous situation, be it between husband and wife, child and parent, or between siblings. The Prophet said, “If one of you is angry while he is standing, let him sit down so his anger will leave him; otherwise, let him lie down” (Abu Dawud). He also recommended making *wudu*, the ritual cleansing or ablutions that include washing the hands, mouth, nostrils, arms, head and feet. He said, “Verily, anger comes from Shaytan and Shaytan was created from fire. Fire is extinguished with water, so if you become angry then perform ablution with water” (Abu Dawud).
3. **Get physically away from everyone else for some time everyday**
While avoiding crowded places and social distancing are key to containing the spread of Covid-19, this does not mean we can't go outside to benefit from some distance between ourselves and those quarantined with us. Whether it's spending time in the backyard for an hour, going for a walk alone, or a drive to pick up necessities, spend some time away from everyone else for the sake of your mental health.
4. **Count your blessings - literally**
In Islam, thankfulness to God, called *shukr*, is key to being a good Muslim. Gratitude leads people to being happier and less depressed. Even at a time of pandemic there is much to be thankful for. If we are safe, healthy, and with our families, these are all tremendous blessings. If you have never before kept a gratitude journal, this is the time to start. Every night before going to sleep, sit with your family and count all of the good things that happened that day and write them down in a family journal.
5. **Connect with family and friends - remotely**
Social isolation can literally kill you. But even if you are surrounded by family, friendships play a key role in keeping your mental health intact and reducing stress. With tools like Facetime, it's easier than ever to stay in touch with and check in on friends. Set a time daily or weekly with friends for lunch/brunch/coffee break. Then share conversation as you both enjoy your meal in your own homes.
6. **Look forward to Ramadan**
At this moment, the arrival of Ramadan, the blessed month of spiritual blessings and growth, is in a few weeks. No matter how long we have before quarantining ends, we can still look forward to a month when we draw closer to Allah. Remind yourself that *insha Allah*, this will end, and a better time is just around the corner. Start setting goals for Ramadan now, in anticipation for it.

Imam Abdul Malik Mujahid, Executive Director of SoundVision, and the former chair of the Parliament of the World's Religions offered the following reasoning about why it is appropriate for Muslims to cancel Juma prayers at this time. He writes:

Here is our Islamic reasoning, explaining why we believe that those who have cancelled Juma prayers, daily congregational prayers, and weekend schools are wiser, scientifically correct, and more sound in their Islamic opinion:

- Whereas Allah says saving one life is like saving all of humanity (Quran 5:32);
- Whereas Allah tells us not to put ourselves at risk of death (Quran 2:195);
- Whereas the Prophet once on a rainy day inserted an announcement in *azan* that people pray at home. When Prophet's companion Abdullah Ibn Abbas narrated this on a Friday for people to pray at home, some Muslims disliked it, dismayed, he responded: "One who is better than me did that. *Juma* is obligatory, but I do not want to force you to walk in the mud and on slippery ground." (Recorded by Sahih Bukhari);
- Whereas the Prophet of Allah has asked us to tie the camel and then depend on God;
- Whereas protecting and saving human life is the first and foremost objective of *shari'ah*. It takes precedent over all other objectives of Islamic faith as life is the basis of everything else.
- Whereas Islamic scholars in the past have cancelled *Juma* prayers when there is a storm or health risk for people;
- Whereas medical experts state that a person does not have to have symptoms to transmit the disease. Those who do not display symptoms might pass it on to others;
- Whereas the coronavirus death rate among the elderly ranges from 10% to 18%;
- Whereas scientific research has established that this virus remains harmful up to three hours in the air and up to three days on plastic and stainless steel;
- Whereas containment of a pandemic through limiting human contact is the critical key to deal with the global problem;
- Whereas medical experts are asking people to avoid crowded spaces and create human-to-human social distance;
- Whereas we have already seen the dangerous impact of not cancelling religious events in Malaysia, where 243 cases of coronavirus (and 9 critically ill patients) have been linked to a mosque gathering;
- Whereas an acute shortage of testing does not allow doctors to notice a community outbreak until it's too late;
- Whereas there is no vaccine for this virus;
- Whereas Public Health officials are appealing to congregations to shut down;

Instead of *juma*, offer *zuhra* prayers (the obligatory second or noon prayer) and take time to devote 30 minutes after or before *zuhra* prayer for Quran reading, listening to an Islamic lecture or an online *khutba*, making extended *dua* for yourself and your neighbors, and doing *zikr* (remembrances) of Allah.

More insights from the Islamic tradition:

- Islamic Society of North America: <http://www.isna.net/covid/>
- Sound Vision: <https://www.soundvision.com/>

OMNIA's Leaders Are in Place

Today, in Nigeria's Gombe State, there are 71 Interfaith Peacemaker Teams (IP Teams), 20 in Sri Lanka, and 20 in Bangladesh. These are 15-20 member teams of religious leaders and people of faith. Trained in OMNIA's methods of collaboration across religions and other identity markers, and in building power for strategic action, teams take on urgent, relevant and winnable issues that arise from the ground in local communities.

Nigerian IP Teams, augmented by OMNIA-trained nursing students have visited 24 communities and provided religious leaders (imams and pastors) with awareness training, so that they may use their public voice to communicate the principles and instructions of pandemic awareness and preparation. In this endeavor, OMNIA and its partner organization in Gombe, Community Peace Dialogue and Interfaith Initiatives has partnered with KAICIID (King Abdullah International Center Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue) in Vienna, Austria.

IP Teams in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are ready to do the same. However, curfew imposed by their governments has made such interventions impossible. As soon as curfew is lifted IP leaders in both countries will be activated to take the project to their communities.

The unique feature of IP Teams and their leaders is that they are trained in interreligious collaboration, building power and strategic thinking. They know to listen to the people in their communities to discern the issues that are most urgent and relevant for their context and they know to strategically cut a thin-slice that is winnable. They are a community force capable of undertaking any issue that comes up from the ground.

As IP Teams increase in number and impact, OMNIA expects that the effectiveness of interreligious collaboration will produce a cultural shift that decreases people's tolerance of extremist religion and increases their affirmation of pluralistic religion. The IP Teams are designed to become a component of a community's social-infrastructure that encourages democratic citizen engagement for peacebuilding.

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COVID-19

Know The Facts



COVID-19 spreads primarily from person to person



- Droplets released when someone sick sneezes or coughs can land on the mouths or noses of people nearby
- Close contact with someone sick – like hugging or shaking hands



COVID-19 mainly spreads from person to person But it can also be left on objects and surfaces...



Reduce your risk of COVID-19



Clean your hands often



Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth



Avoid close contact with someone who is sick

Cough or sneeze in your bent elbow – not your hands!



Limit social gatherings and time spent in crowded places



Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces

